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SUBJECT: NOT QUITE READY FOR PRIME TIME? THE PREVAL
PRESIDENCY GETS OFF TO SLOW START BUT PRIME MINISTER ALEXIS
BEGINS TO MOVE TO THE FOREFRONT

REF: PORT AU PRINCE 1184

Classified By: Ambassador Janet A. Sanderson, reason 1.5(B)

1.(C) Summary. Two months after Rene Preval's inauguration, the new President continues to take a relatively low profile, as his intimates argue that he is deliberately leaving the spotlight to newly appointed Prime Minister Alexis. The structure supporting Preval has yet to jell, making it difficult to deal with the Presidency. Port au Prince,s chattering classes talk of governmental drift, and some attribute the recent uptick in violence to a perception that Preval has a "hands-off" policy. Friends and colleagues dispute this, saying Preval is energetic, engaged and focused. They deny any health problems. Preval,s own personality, coupled with institutional and personnel weaknesses, have contributed to an impression of drift among some Haitians, but Preval is unconcerned. He contends that Alexis should be handling the day to day operations of the government. The PM appears to be taking the president at his word and is working to establish himself as an activist leader, although we expect that he has limits on his independence. We believe that grousing about "drift" will dissipate if/when the new government takes decisive action and is seen as addressing the country,s problems. However, the real decisions rest in Preval,s hands - and he has yet to show his cards. End Summary.

12. (C) Two months after Rene Preval's inauguration, the new President has opted to take a relatively low profile, remaining close to Ashton House, his residence. Although the President has just returned from a whirlwind of visits to Europe, the US and the Caribbean, he has thus far limited his public appearances in Haiti to a few high profile events such as the installation of the Cabinet and stayed away from the press. He continues to maintain, at least in public, a hands-off approach to governing.

13. (C) Preval,s critics say that he took too long to select his government and has yet to establish a timetable for action or further define his priorities. They claim that he has no specific plan for solving Haiti,s many ills and decry his lack of specificity both on the campaign trail and since assuming office. Among some of our contacts, there is a

perception of presidential "drift" and lack of purpose. Indeed, these individuals argue that the recent uptick in violence, including a spate of kidnappings, is a deliberate gang challenge to Preval as he works through his transition.

¶4. (C) Close associates of the President strongly dispute the idea that there is "drift" in the government or that the president has no real vision for the country. They tell us that Preval is actively and energetically engaged in the business of governing. (Today, July 7, the Minister of Justice raced off to an emergency meeting at Ashton House, saying the President is furious about last night's tire burnings on Delmas Road and violence in Martissant.) They contend that his low profile is a deliberate effort to focus the spotlight on the Prime Minister, Jacques Edouard Alexis, and his new government. Preval himself dismissed reports of "drift", assuring me that he wants to have the Prime Minister managing the day to day operations of the country, while he serves as Chief of State. Alexis noted to me that he consults regularly and repeatedly with the President, taking his cue from his boss. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, who traveled with Preval, reports that the president was frequently on the phone to Port au Prince, updating himself on the situation the ground and issuing orders.

¶5. (C) Nonetheless, Preval's personal style -- low key, informal, spare with words -- coupled with his refusal to move into the Presidential Palace and lackadaisical personal staff, have given outsiders the impression that he has been slow to take charge. Working with "Team Preval" can indeed be frustrating. Although personally loyal, and in many instances, quite talented, the Preval team is abysmal at staffing a president. Preval has yet to name a Chief of Staff, although we have been told one will be named soon

(reftel). His scheduler, former Minister of Tourism Martine Deverson, attempts to manage the calendar but visits her children in Florida often. In any event, no appointment is made without the president's express approval. Babette Delatour, a financial specialist and close Preval friend, is lead on all foreign trips, a task that clearly overwhelms her. She has said that she is "pitching in" and will leave the job shortly but acknowledges that there is no replacement in sight.

¶6. (C) Preval's transition to power has also been hampered due to a lack of infrastructure. The President and his staff still work out of the GOH guest house where he resides. There is no switchboard and business is done by personal cell phone. It can take days to raise Deverson, Delatour or Preval's closest confidant Bob Manuel. Protocol is non-existent. French Ambassador Connan sputters when detailing his many efforts to pin plans for Preval's visit to France and the staff's lack of interest in setting a meeting for him to meet with the President to discuss the trip. Senior Haitian officials, including new ministers, resort to email to convey their messages to the inner circle -- as do we. Our conversations around town indicate that the shoddy staff work and poor communications is beginning to discourage even those eager to see the new team off on a solid footing.

¶7. (C) Moving to the Presidential Palace would alleviate some of these logistical issues, if not the organizational ones. Preval has thus far refused to do so. Manuel tells me that there are "traitors" in the palace who must be rooted out before the President takes possession of the building. Manuel has not explained further his concerns except to say that he believes some of the security forces attached to the Palace are not trustworthy.

¶8. (C) Preval's low profile since inauguration has again encouraged rumors that he is terminally ill. I met with him several times recently and was with him at other events, both here and in Miami. He does not appear sick. Indeed, he bore up better than most of us at the painfully prolonged state dinner for Chilean President Bachelet three weeks ago. Cabinet officials and Preval intimates contend the President

is maintaining a heavy schedule and is in good health.

¶9. (C) If Preval's intention at this point is to keep the focus on Alexis, he has succeeded. Since his ratification by Parliament last month, Alexis has been both visible and active: engaging often with the Parliament, meeting the press, visiting ministries. My meetings with Alexis, whether on general issues or with a specific intent, are focused and direct and decisive. Unlike his predecessor, he starts meetings on time, addresses the issue at hand and then moves on, as he did when we discussed next steps in Haiti's electoral process or met to sign a Cite Soleil aid project agreement. Alexis's declaration of general policy in front of parliament - while indeed general in nature - appears to be stimulating some debate here. He exudes great confidence but it is not yet clear how much latitude he will actually have in formulating and executing policy.

¶10. (C) Comment. Setting aside the many logistical challenges of dealing with Team Preval, we believe that the sense of "drift" here that some allude to will indeed dissipate as Prime Minister Alexis is seen to take charge. His public persona is growing and his effective press conferences and outreach are impressive. Make no mistake about it, however. The ultimate decision-maker in Haiti remains Rene Preval. For all his perceived informality, Preval's personal attention, engagement and direction are critical to solving Haiti's problems. And therein lies the rub. Thus far, despite a series of encounters, we have yet to discern clearly how or when Preval intends to deal with the challenges before him. That is not to say that he doesn't have a vision or timetable of what he wants to do, but for now, he is playing his cards close to his vest. Two months after inauguration, Haitians are looking for more.
SANDERSON